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978-0-521-89859-1 - Sentimental Masculinity and the Rise of History, 1790-1890

Mike Goode

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

The feeling of history

I began with a desire to speak with the dead.

Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988)¹

I began with Stephen Greenblatt's desire to speak with the dead. Greenblatt's frank announcement of desire became famous in part because it questioned the possibility and desirability of an unfeeling, impersonal, "disembodied objectivity" toward the past.² That positivist posture was one upon which the discipline of history had been staking its epistemological authority since the late nineteenth century when Victorian academics, reacting against a Romantic tradition of historiography that allied itself with literature and feelings, began modeling the study of history after the sciences.³ But I wanted to investigate the way that Greenblatt's "desire" and its challenge to scientific history still seemed restrained compared to the importance that the earlier Romantic tradition had placed on feeling's role in historical inquiry and historiography. One index of this restraint was the extent to which his desire to speak with the dead recalled, at the same time that it lacked the full range of feelings implied by, the trope of reviving the dead, the leading metaphor for the ideal that historiography sought to realize in the decades just prior to the Victorian rise of historical detachment. When, for example, in *Ivanhoe*'s "Dedicatory Epistle" (1819), Walter Scott likened writing historical novels to reviving "a body whose limbs had recently quivered with existence, and whose throat had but just uttered the last note of agony," his image of the archive as a battlefield strewn with barely deceased corpses indicates how much more the Romantic historiographer wanted from the dead than mere speech (*I*, 7). Scott's revivifying metaphor casts the historical novelist as at once a man of feeling, lovelorn partner, nostalgic comrade, torturer, and witch doctor to a wounded past. By comparison, Greenblatt's relatively tame figure of speech seems to register the continued force of Victorian scientific history's rejection of its feeling Romantic predecessor.

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I do not want to insist too strenuously on this point about Greenblatt's desire, for the ongoing Victorian evacuation of feeling from historical inquiry is evident in any number of more obvious places in contemporary historicist theory and criticism, not least of all in the ways that historicist critics continue to write the history of historical thought as the history of an idea rather than of a feeling (more on this in a moment). But at the very least it seems worth pointing out that this foreclosure has been evident in the fate that Greenblatt's desire has suffered within the New Historicism itself, the critical movement with which his name has become synonymous. It was his ideal of speaking with the dead, more than his statement of the presence of first-person desire in historical inquiry, which the New Historicism seized upon as its critical imperative. In *Practicing New Historicism* (2000), Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher would belatedly characterize the New Historicism's descriptive ideal and interpretive endpoint as "the touch of the real," as well as suggest in true Romantic fashion that "the wish" of its anecdotal methodology "may always have been to revivify," to restore to "the agony of its death throes" something "that had been buried deep in oblivion."⁴ But the movement always placed its heaviest emphasis on the constitutive role of language both in the lived experience of history and in historicist analysis. That emphasis was neatly captured in Louis Montrose's well-known chiasmic formulation of the movement as the study of "The Historicity of Texts and the Textuality of History."⁵ While certain psychoanalytic critics may object that language *is* desire, my point is simply that the New Historicist critics' desires, and the operations of their feelings more generally, never seemed to matter very much to them when it came to understanding and assessing the historicity of their own critical project. While the movement has done much since its inception to chart the discursive construction and operation of sentiment and desire in other times and places, it has barely gestured at analyzing either the discursive construction of its own desire to speak with the dead or the genealogy of its apparent reticence about that desire.⁶

Sentimental Masculinity and the Rise of History does not set out to revive Romantic historicism in the contemporary academy so much as to review it through the lens of its Victorian-era rejection, with an eye towards understanding the intellectual and political history of how historians' desires, pleasures, and feelings first came to feel out of place. Through an examination of the line of Romantic historicist thought that became constitutive of the Victorian reaction against Romantic historicism in general, this book offers a new account of the epistemological complexity of historicist thought at the time of its emergence, significantly complicates received

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accounts of the gender politics that underwrote the formation of the discipline of history in Britain, argues for the historical novel's importance as evidence for both of these critical projects, and, finally, speculates that Romantic historicism may not have been eradicated by the Victorian academy so much as moved outside its walls and into the home and the history museum. In general, this book makes the case that historical epistemology underwent a shift over the course of the long nineteenth century from being a *feeling* of history to being an *idea* of history and that recognizing this shift shakes up the archive and alters the key terms through which we can assess the history of historical thought and the formation of the historical discipline. More particularly, it charts how this epistemological shift was enacted, and the discipline of history ultimately consolidated as the pursuit of an idea, through a complex political and philosophical struggle over the nature and social importance of feeling, especially over the relation between feeling and manliness. That shift is one in which an unlikely set of historical actors – namely, characters and character types devised and developed in political treatises, caricatures, and historical novels – came to play starring roles.

Over the course of Britain's long nineteenth century, "history" changed from denoting a branch of letters loosely affiliated with philosophy and literature to naming a professionalized academic discipline that many of its practitioners regarded as a science.⁷ These so-called scientific historians were the ascendant figures at the time that history became a curricular subject in British universities in the 1850s and was subsequently consolidated as a discipline with the establishment in the early 1870s of a School of History at Oxford and a separate History Tripos, or B. A. honors examination in history, at Cambridge. As has been well documented, an older Romantic historicism gave way to the rise of scientific history, which sought, following the influential continental example of Leopold von Ranke, to use intensive archival work and scientific research methods to produce an objective account of "what actually happened" (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*).⁸ Romantic historicism's practitioners placed less value on objective, clinical accuracy than on looking to the past for the purposes of sentimental education, present cultural critique, civic and political indoctrination, nostalgia, and entertainment or escape. As this account already implies, the number of intellectual fields, genres, and publics involved in defining the nature of historical understanding, and in contesting what kinds of writing could stake claim to offering it, shrank dramatically over the course of the century as the university-based discipline consolidated its hold over the field.

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From our contemporary vantage point, one consequence of this generic contraction was that for a long time historians of history tended not to look at many of the texts, genres, and contexts that were actively involved in defining and contesting the field of history over the course of the long nineteenth century. They discussed individual thinkers and history texts from this period either in relation to triumphant metanarratives of the development of historicist consciousness and the academic discipline of history or, alternatively, as evidence of the predominance of various philosophical, political, and doctrinal commitments at specific moments.⁹ Most gave scant attention to the more microhistorical sociocultural work that pre-disciplinary writers and texts performed in defining the boundaries of historical representation and knowledge. Consequently, histories of history traditionally tended to concentrate on writers and texts that their authors immediately recognized as, and that commentators in the periods in question readily acknowledged to be, historians and histories, thus making the *de facto* archive for their inquiries a rather narrow and self-mirroring canon.¹⁰

In recent years, the focus has begun to shift as scholars have undertaken the descriptive and recuperative projects of bringing to light some of the neglected corners of the intellectual and generic field defining the historical in the opening decades of the long nineteenth century. Exemplary studies like Stephen Bann's *Romanticism and the Rise of History* (1995), Bonnie G. Smith's *The Gender of History* (1998), Rosemary Mitchell's *Picturing the Past* (2000), and Mark Salber Phillips's *Society and Sentiment* (2000) have broadened historians', literary critics', and art historians' views of what cultural and representational domains are relevant for making sense of historiography and historical thought in the period.¹¹ Certainly *Sentimental Masculinity and the Rise of History* can be read as a contribution to this general critical effort to describe and uncover the pre-disciplinary heterogeneity of history as an intellectual field. Focusing on the political work of demarcating the field of history's boundaries during Britain's long nineteenth century, I necessarily devote much of my attention to genres and texts that were once neglected – and in many instances still go unnoticed – by historians of history, including satirical political caricatures, polemical pamphlets on the French Revolution, ephemeral broadsides, critical review essays, and historical novels.

At the same time, however, my emphasis here is less on charting overlooked domains of the pre-disciplinary field of history than on revealing the existence and persistence of a particularly influential line of Romantic historicist thought that comes most sharply into focus when it passes into and out of some of these overlooked domains. That line of thought, which

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finds its point of departure in Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), grounds historical epistemology in a thinker's manliness and his capacity for feeling. I lay out this claim in Chapter 2 and then, in Chapter 3, demonstrate how pamphleteers and caricaturists opposed to Burke in the 1790s actually consolidated the historical epistemology he espoused. As they brought a variety of satirical character types to bear on his ideal of the historian as a chivalric man of feeling, they challenged but also entrenched that ideal. Chapters 4 and 5 show how this Burkean line of Romantic historicism was later redrawn by Scott in the 1810s, as his early historical novels employed the same character types to generate a genealogy of the historian as a man of feeling, a genealogy that also granted historical authority to the historical novel. Finally, Chapter 6 and a brief Coda trace how the line was successfully diverted away from the discipline of history by Victorian scientific historians, who presented the intellectual field of history as a domain of uneven development with scientific history in ascendance and the historical novel in decline. Grafting a generational teleology onto this field, scientific historians justified their mode of historical inquiry by locating its authority in an emergent unfeeling manliness, effectively rendering Romantic historicists' feelings – now recast as signs of their boyishness – archaic and immature, and thus out of place in the newly professionalized discipline of history. The effectiveness of this Victorian foreclosure of Romantic historicism from the academy had the consequence, however, of allowing it to take root in the privacy of the family home and in the public intellectual domain of the museum. It was in the home and in the museum that Romantic historicism ultimately found a place to flourish.

My account of Romantic historicism challenges the accuracy of conceiving of it as epistemologically continuous with Victorian scientific history. Though scholars across the disciplines have only recently rediscovered the broader contours of the Romantic field of the historical, they have long assigned important roles in the development of historicist epistemology to certain tendencies and thinkers within that field.¹² According to this by now familiar narrative, the revolution in historical thought that occurred during Britain's Romantic period – the alteration that philosophers and historians traditionally identify as the hallmark of historicism's advent – amounted primarily to a transformation in epistemological forms or, in what amounts to the same thing, to the formation of an impersonal, immaterial idea. In R. G. Collingwood's classic formulation of this narrative, *The Idea of History* (1946), European intellectuals and writers, newly conscious of cultural and chronological difference, came to realize in the early nineteenth century that

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“the historical development of the science of human nature entails an historical development in human nature itself.”¹³ Subsequent generations of scholars – including thinkers as diverse, and in some cases as philosophically distant from Collingwood’s idealism, as Georg Lukács, Friedrich Meinecke, Michel Foucault, Reinhard Koselleck, J. G. A. Pocock, and Benedict Anderson – have followed *The Idea of History*’s lead, disagreeing primarily over the specific content of the idea of history and the relevant contexts for understanding its emergence.¹⁴

For Meinecke, the “new historical outlook” that Germans call “historism” emerged at the turn of the nineteenth century, when European thinkers, including Burke, began appreciating the particularity of all human events as expressions of individual processes of thought. Historism thus became a kind of master idea within the more general series of individuated ideas that historicists view all human history as unfolding.¹⁵ Foucault turns histories of ideas like Meinecke’s inside out, arguing that historicist thought emerged as eighteenth-century developments in philosophy and science gave humans the idea that they were not the center of the world or even necessarily the center of their own history – that various aspects of the world change over time without reference either to humanity or to one another. For Foucault, the new eighteenth-century thinking about history that Meinecke describes represented humanity’s emergent need to find its own reflection in a history from which it was being decentered. Nevertheless, like Meinecke, Foucault still presents the epistemic shift after 1775 to this new historical thought (a shift he calls the advent of “The Age of History”) as part of a history of ideas in which any given idea’s authority is impersonal and ultimately disembodied. For Foucault, as for Meinecke, the authority of the idea of history in the Age of History never depends on who thinks it.¹⁶

Indeed, histories of historical thought routinely assume the impersonality and disembodiment of the idea of history at the moment of its appearance. For Koselleck, historicism emerged when the experience of revolution and temporal acceleration during the closing decades of the eighteenth century produced a sea-change in thinking about time. As European intellectuals began to understand history as a record of human progress, the historicist idea that each historical moment is unique replaced the view that history consists of a series of situations that can be generalized as timeless lessons in statecraft.¹⁷ According to this account, historicism, while derived from a new experience of time, still amounted to a *Zeitgeist* that assumed cultural authority apart from individuals and their material conditions. The same can be said of the accounts offered by Lukács and Anderson, critics whom

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one might expect to stand outside the philosophically idealist tradition of thinking about history that I am charting here. Both attribute historicist thought's advent to transformations in material cultural conditions: in the case of Lukács, to Britain's nascent globalization and the British populace's accompanying sense of historical contingency and geographic particularity; in the case of Anderson, to the rise of print capitalism in Europe and the concomitant emergence of a communal sense of national belonging.¹⁸ Nevertheless, for both thinkers, historicism still constitutes an idea that, albeit originally derived from a historical situation conceived in materialist terms, does not depend for its ongoing authority on being thought by an individual located within or even familiar with that original situation. The same point might be made about any number of the many histories of historiography in the past hundred years. By way of establishing the continued primacy of history's status among scholars as an impersonal, immaterial idea, however, it is worth noting that James Chandler's *England in 1819* (1998), the most rigorous study to date of historicism's specifically Romantic British roots, is also the most prominent recent examination to invent the idea of history anew. Chandler sets his sights specifically on identifying the particular "simple epistemological form" whose "alteration" marked the advent of Romantic historicism.¹⁹

This book argues that such accounts of the history of historical epistemology lie at odds with the ways that most Romantic, and some Victorian, thinkers conceived of the nature of historical thought. Early nineteenth-century Britain's struggles to define what constitutes historical knowledge and authoritative historiography were as much contests over the social and gendered propriety of particular feelings as they were struggles strictly over epistemological forms. In fact, according to the influential mode of Romantic historicist thought that took shape through these contests, history was perceived more as a feeling than as an idea. Demonstrating this thesis will not undermine the validity of history-as-idea accounts, even if it will suggest that such accounts fail to appreciate the number of different discursive realms in which the idea of history was being altered. But this book will reveal discontinuity and heterogeneity within the history of history in places where these accounts see only continuity and homogeneity. By understating the importance that British Romantic thinkers placed on feeling as that which enables historical understanding, many historians of history have taken the position that the scientific history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and even the New Historicism of the present, are more refinements of, than they are reactions against, their Romantic predecessors. Only by recognizing the centrality of feeling to

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Romantic historicist epistemology, however, can we begin to appreciate fully the extent to which history severed its ties to its Romantic forebears as the nineteenth century unfolded and historians began adopting the ideal of an impersonal, disinterested, and almost anaesthetized scientific impartiality towards the historical record. Indeed, I will be arguing in part that the idea emerged as the central analytical term for writing the history of historical epistemology *because* of the rise of scientific history: thinking about history as a disembodied, impersonal idea reflected just how serious Victorian historians were about establishing their distance from their feeling Romantic predecessors. The size of the chasm they produced is discernible in the way that many historiographers today claim intellectual descent from the Romantic field of history even as they fail to recognize its size and contours.

The epistemological shift and accompanying disciplinary formation this book charts were embedded in a broader cultural debate over what value history, as a genre of writing and as an intellectual field, held within British society. What I gain by privileging *feeling* over *idea* as my primary analytical term is the ability to reveal how this debate over the value of history was itself imbricated in a far more wide-ranging philosophical, political, and scientific contest over feeling. That contest covered everything from feeling's relationship to the intellectual faculties to its potential value for maintaining social order and making sexual differences legible. Privileging historians' feelings over their ideas ultimately will help clarify the apparent discursive slippage whereby so many long-nineteenth-century debates over what counts as authoritative and socially valuable history played out as contests over what might seem today to be irrelevant domains – the feelings and the manliness of different kinds of historians. According to the Romantic historicist epistemology that Victorian scientific historians later rejected, a man needed to feel the idea of history in order to think it. To the extent that manliness's relationship to feeling was, for reasons that will be elaborated in a moment, open to debate throughout the century, *ad hominem* attacks on historians' manliness became a legitimate means of questioning their feelings – and thus also the social value and epistemological authority – of their historical sense.

Before trying to unpack the significance of this argument for scholars of the gender of history, as well as its potential interest to scholars of gender generally, more needs to be said about the nineteenth-century logic whereby personal attacks on historians' feelings and manliness could count as legitimate modes of indicting their authority. This will also require explaining what that logic had to do with the widespread concern in the

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period over the sociality of feeling and the sociality of studying the past. Otherwise, Chapter 2's account of how Burke's *Reflections* grounded historians' authority in the manliness of their feelings might produce the misleading impression that this grounding sprang fully-formed out of the "Genius of Burke" (to use Wordsworth's notorious phrase from the 1805 *The Prelude* [vii.512]). Instead, I want to claim that *Reflections* functioned more as a catalyst for Romantic society to begin thinking about historical authority in ways that it was already prepared to do. By tracing out the broader Romantic discourse that linked feeling, manliness, and sociality to each other and to historical authority – the discourse which this book contends *Reflections* played such a major role in solidifying – I also can clarify a few of the book's key terms.

Romantic Britain's preoccupation with the role of feeling in historical inquiry represented a general concern over how history matters in the present. It is not hard to understand why this would have been a particularly vexed issue in the period. The French Revolution prompted an intense phase of British speculation about, as well as political organization in response to, the possibility that a similar revolutionary fate might await Britain.²⁰ Much of the speculation took the form of a historical dispute, played out in the 1790s through thousands of contentious political pamphlets, caricatures, and broadsides. The French wanted a complete break with the past. Before the Revolution, prominent intellectuals like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Denis Diderot articulated their aspiration for such a break, the latter contending that his *Encyclopédie* (1781) would enable the future to free itself from the past by making all knowledge available in a form that could be quickly digested and then subsumed.²¹ After the Revolution was underway, revolutionaries forcefully, and propagandistically, signaled their sense of having achieved such a break by instituting a new calendar in 1793 that began counting years from the date of the first French Republic.

Thinkers in Britain who accepted French claims of a historical break on their face tended, if opposed to the Revolution, to value historical inquiry as a force of conservation and reaction or, if supportive of the Revolution, to devalue historical inquiry on the same grounds.²² A much larger group of radical and conservative intellectuals – a group that included Burke, Richard Price, Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, James Mackintosh, William Cuninghame, and Joseph Gerrald – attempted to contextualize the revolution historically, not only disputing whether the events in France had precedent in Britain's own Revolution of 1688 but also whether popular rebellion was the historically necessary (and thus defensible) result of the

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abuses of France's *ancien régime*.²³ Both of these conversations independently confirmed for British audiences the political power of historical inquiry to comment and pass judgment on present social formations. At a time of intense and probably well-founded fears of revolution in Britain, historical inquiry was invested with the power both to shore up and to question the legitimacy of the order of things in British society.

Romantic British thinkers concerned with how history mattered to the present also attended to the conditions of the investigation, writing, and reading of particular histories. Late eighteenth-century intellectuals may generally have agreed that historical inquiry could directly affect social transformation and conservation in the present, but many also recognized that not all such inquiries necessarily did so. The intellectual lineage of their concerns extends back to the Ancients versus Moderns debate in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Britain's broad cultural dispute over whether ancient classical authors possessed greater wisdom and happiness than modern ones. Humanist thinkers (proponents of the Ancients) rejected various modern forms of historical investigation on the grounds that they failed to yield any kind of wisdom or useful instruction for the present.²⁴ Perhaps the most significant of these modern forms was antiquarianism, which emphasized firsthand examination of ruins, inscriptions, and artifacts as a method of accumulating new information about the past and either corroborating or falsifying the documentary historical record. By the mid-eighteenth century, many British historians, Enlightenment thinkers deeply committed to modern modes of rational investigation, in effect conflated the Ancient and Modern positions. They turned to the past primarily in order to chart the growth of reason over time and thus rejected the need to write the histories of certain times and places on the grounds that nothing but irrationality could be found in them.²⁵ In the first chapter of his influential six-volume *History of England* (1754–62), for example, David Hume gave short shrift to pre-Roman Britain because he felt that its history had little empirical value for a "cultivated age," famously remarking that "it is rather fortunate for letters that [records of events from this period] are buried in silence and oblivion."²⁶

The idea that certain histories are beneath notice persisted in a new form into the Romantic era, despite the fact that Enlightenment thinking about history was rapidly being superseded by the emergence of the historicist idea of the uniqueness of all times and places. Cultural commentators started to fear that history, a field just beginning to define its object of knowledge as distinct and removed from present social formations, ran the risk of actually cutting historical investigators and their audiences off from those